



In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide

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In 1963, Nancy Rappaport's mother committed suicide after a bitter divorce and custody battle. Nancy was four years old. As one of eleven children in a prominent Boston family, Nancy struggled to come to terms with the reasons why her mother took her own life. After years spent interviewing family and friends, Rappaport uncovers the story of a conflicted and troubled activist, socialite, and community leader. Drawing on court depositions, her mother's unpublished novel, newspapers, and her own experiences, she highlights heartbreaking stories of a complicated life that played out in the public eye. Inspiring, honest, and engaging, Rappaport's story sheds light on the agonizing nature of loss and healing, and reveals the permeable boundaries between therapists and the patients they treat.

In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide Details

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Nicole says

I won this book from a Good-Reads First-Reads giveaway, so I was surprised to find that it had been copyrighted since 2009.

That being said, it started out pretty slow. It reminded me of a Mary Roach type book, only less witty. Or funny. But the subject matter really isn't that funny... although there were a few times when the author did make me laugh aloud when referring to some of her and her siblings childhood antics.

The author (as everyone knows if they read the title of the book) is "A Child Psychiatrist Explor[ing] the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide". Explore, research and distance herself from friends & family she certainly did while trying to unravel something that took place when she was four years old.

In fact, she has to piece together things that happened *before she was born*, and it is in these places that the writing is stale.

This is a Doctor, here. M.D.'s are usually only comfortable with facts. When Rappaport is writing about THE FACTS (i.e. - the childhood she actually remembers, clinical explanations of mental disorders) the writing seems to flow fairly easily. When she goes to speculation... about ANYTHING (even her kids/husbands feelings, her mother) the writing style turns to broken sentences and is very choppy. The book goes back and fourth between these two styles (which is a bit annoying).

The subject matter is interesting enough, however.. since the Rappaport's are a real-life Brady Bunch. (I can't help to think what all 11 children thought of that show) Nice touch incorporating some photographs.

It's freaky how all those kids (the original six) look so much alike.

Claire McAlpine says

In 1963, Nancy Rappaport was 4 years old and the youngest of six children when her mother, an ambitious woman who balanced raising a large family, organising regular society events and political campaigning, committed suicide in the wake of a heart-wrenching custody battle.

Nancy now has three grown children of her own and has written this book both as a daughter needing to find answers and as a professional child psychiatrist, bringing together her education, experience, the wisdom of years and a compassionate perspective to narrate this compelling memoir of an extraordinary life whose end was sad and tragic.

From a childhood in which the nurturing love of a mother was ruptured so abruptly, through adolescence and early adulthood where the subject of her mother appears to have been taboo, it is extraordinary and something of a blessed gift that Nancy comes across a trunk of belongings that has virtually been in hiding or at best forgotten all these years.

It is a credit to her father and stepmother that it wasn't destroyed and so Nancy in her quest to know her mother better, gains access to lists, notes, notebooks, a journal and astonishingly, the manuscript of a complete novel. At last, she begins to gain a first-hand insight into who her mother really was, aside from all that had been written publicly and most importantly she begins to piece together how her mother was thinking in the time leading up to her death.

Rappaport follows leads like a master sleuth hesitating to question herself only briefly in pursuing her mother's former lover, an estranged best friend and a former confidante of her grandmother, to unearth as much information surrounding the events of that period during her parents' marriage and subsequent divorce. Little by little, she draws back the carefully drawn veil of secrecy, though not entirely without getting her fingers burnt.

It's tempting to search for the villain and it could be said that each of the main characters in this true story are tried out and tested in that role, but none endure. Such is the faculty of being human, perhaps we all have the potential if pushed sufficiently but here we find few heroes or villains, just victims, bystanders and those trying to do their best under the circumstances.

It is a bold move to publish a family story when so many are touched by past events and family ties remain tenuous. Nancy suffers the expected consequences to a certain extent though she tries to navigate her way with compassion and empathy as much as she can. It's a difficult and interesting topic, to write a version of the truth that recalls the faded memories of real life characters, while respecting those who wish to remain silent.

In my reading of this courageous memoir, some of the lessons come not from digging in the past or even from the professional perspective, but from Nancy's own children, who are a constant reminder of the present that we live in and the role and responsibility of a mother to her children, doing her best, learning as she goes, loving them above all so that they have the best chance to be loving, caring and successful people themselves and that no matter what anyone says or does or whatever the circumstances, a mother will maintain that role whether she is full-time, part time, at a distance or just a faded memory.

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

I don't read many memoirs, especially family-oriented ones: I'm prone to flash judgments and over empathizing; I can shake off fiction that rattles me but nonfiction sticks a little more. Still, this Boston-based memoir attracted me so I started it with some apprehension.

Very quickly, I saw how courageous Rappaport was as she tackled the story of her parent's marriage, her mother's suicide, and her father's subsequent parenting choices since she, her father and stepmothers, and many of her siblings still live locally. Her professional training as a psychiatrist showed through on every page: she acknowledged when her research frightened her family and offered many opportunities for her father to have his say about the story she was telling. At moments, I was impatient with her fair-minded and even-handed presentation: I wanted her to be critical or judgmental -- even mean. But in the end, she won me over (despite my muttering about her father and stepmothers) by going beyond simply recounting the days leading up to her mother's death. She explored the facets of abuse, infidelity, mental illness, addiction, and grief that impacted everyone in her family in a readable way that didn't feel too technical or dry nor too salacious or torrid. As her family has enormous connections in Boston's history, politics, and development (her grandfather was the lawyer for Vanzetti of Sacco and Vanzetti, for example) and Rappaport provides

enough background to give the reader some appreciation of how publicly her parent's lived.

This is another book I've spent all week talking about to almost everyone I know. While I've never had someone close to me commit suicide, I was still able to appreciate Rappaport's looks at her family and how this painful event (and the moments before and after) impacted all of them -- and see some of my own familial pain, however dissimilar, in her story. This quiet memoir is moving but not soul-crushing, readable and genuine.

Carol says

I hesitated to pick this book for reading. My brother committed suicide while he was in medical school. I had thought that maybe she was writing this book as attempt to understand her mother's decision and possibly help others with family suicides.

I can understand why she would want to find out everything about the mother that she lost at the age of four. The reason that I hesitated to read it was that I didn't agree with her decision to sell it as a book. I felt that it should have been kept private. I can see how her family would not feel comfortable with her decision to publish it. To me, it increase hurt instead of dealing with it.

If the author had gained some insight into why her mother took her life, and then wrote a book in an attempt to prevent the suicides of others, I would have felt better. But the way that she wrote the book, it made me feel like a voyeur into the family's pain and suffering.

This is not a book to race through, I picked up, read some and put it down. I felt strong sympathy for her mother (also named Nancy) as a child. If you read this book I am sure that you will agree with me that tremendous damage had been done to her as a child. The only thing that hooked me to finishing the book was my hope that the book would change and she would do some self examination instead of just factually reporting what happened. I have a background in psychology and counseling and the book left a very cold feeling instead of a deep understanding of why it happened.

The author goes into great detail about the messy divorce that her mother and father, including horrible custody battle. She profiles her siblings one by one and also tells of her mother and father. The happy times in their early married life, I felt were the best part of this book.

I don't think that including her patient stories are really needed in her book.

In summary, I was disappointed in the amount of insight in it. I didn't really feel her love for her brothers and sisters. When I read it,

I cannot recommend this book, especially to anyone who has had someone in their family attempt suicide.

I received this book from GoodReads but that in no way influenced the content of my review.

Stephany says

Nancy Rappaport was 4 years old when her mother committed suicide. Her parents were embroiled in a bitter custody battle at the time, with the courts siding with her father in the most recent battle before she killed herself. The story is about Rappaport trying to find closure in the death of her mom, seeking out anything to understand her mother's mind and why she committed suicide. It is a mini-biography of her mom, her father, her family, and herself. It is a daughter trying to put together the pieces of her mother's life.

For me, I never felt like I got a true picture of Nancy's mother. I learned a lot about Nancy herself, her parenting styles, and how she and her siblings learned to cope without their mother. While there was exploration into her mother's past and how she came to meet Nancy's father and raise her children, there seemed to be more of an emphasis on how the family coped afterward. It makes sense, though, since the author was just four when her mother passed, but judging by the subtitle, I was expecting to have a clearer picture of her mother.

This was the type of story you would have to read in bits and pieces. The author's writing style is very good and easy to read, but there is a lot of information to digest. It's the type of book you have to read a little at a time, process, then pick up again in a few days. There was a lot of clinical information that I found interesting, but I imagine it just might be too much for some people.

In the end, it was a good book but I wouldn't shelve it among my favorites. It tended to get very wordy in parts. If you're a fan of non-fiction and memoirs, it's a good pick for a book chock-full of anecdotes and information, especially involving suicide and how a family copes with the aftermath.

Terry says

I didn't really feel like this was a child psychiatrist using her skills to come to an understanding of her mother as much as it was simply a personal memoir. So oddly, I felt a little deceived. And it suffers from that...thing...where someone's family and family dramas are vastly interesting to them, but not necessarily to anyone else; I wondered at times whether the supposed notoriety of the events was supposed to lend some kind of gravitas to the events.

Terri says

'In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explore the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide' by Nancy Rappaport is an interesting take on the exploration of the suicide of a close family member. Part family history, part psychological study, this book aims to tell the story of Rappaport's mother, a generous, outgoing, political woman who had six children and seemed to have it all--for awhile.

The story also focuses on the author's life as it is today. She talks about bringing up the past to all the major players inside and outside of the immediate family around the time of her mother's suicide. This gives an interesting look into the process of coming to terms with her mother's suicide and how her professional life has also helped her come to understand just exactly what when on in her mother's life when she was too young to understand.

While this is a very intriguing story to read, some readers may get bogged down with the footnotes and some of the more technical psychology explanations throughout the book. Overall, it is a good read if you want to

learn more about the long term affects on the immediate family of a person who commits suicide.

*Reviewer received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads

Lauren says

This is a book written by a child psychiatrist that not only explores the tragic loss of a mother to suicide, but also the inner workings of a family disrupted by divorce and tragedy. While at times the book seems to jump around chronologically, and at first seemed to read like a long essay, the narrator, Nancy (her mother's name-sake), slowly begins to open up about the sense of bewilderment and loss she feels surrounding her mother's death. As Nancy brings her emotions to the forefront, the book becomes very absorbing. Not only is the author searching for answers for herself, she is also searching for some closure so that she can give herself fully to her own children, and also give them answers to the questions they're so curious about. While the foundation of the book is about the first Nancy Rappaport, a loving mother of 6 who killed herself in the midst of a messy custody battle, the themes of the book extend much further than just the story of a tragic suicide. And the psychiatric/psychological perspective is quite intriguing as the author explores children's reactions to the death of a parent or sibling, alcoholism, divorce, remarriage, and suicide. This book could be a good resource to anyone who has lost a parent or loved one to suicide or who is just interested in the subject. It is the brutally honest subjective experience of a well-informed author who has a natural touch for writing narrative. I enjoyed this book, and highly recommend it.

Pam says

There are events that paint themselves onto our souls, forever coloring our lives. Losing a mother at age four is one of those events. Losing a mother at age four because she committed suicide takes it to another dimension.

Nancy Rappaport's mother had it all: a husband, 6 children, a successful career, drive and ambition. Unfortunately, she was also depressed and wildly impulsive. This depression and impulsivity led her to commit suicide, in 1963, when Nancy was just four years old. Now, some 48 years later, Nancy is still searching for answers, trying to make sense of it. In her words, "In a sense I have tried to resurrect my mother, to know her as her youngest daughter.." and "I have pursued any lead that might give me a remote sense of who she was and to unravel the mystery of her death."

She pieces together her mother's life, her relationships with the people she loved. This is not an easy task, her mother was a very complicated woman. Very driven and ambitious, but also selfish and impulsive. Personally, I did not find her very likable, but you have to wonder if she would have been so selfish and impulsive if her depression had been treated successfully. Her bad decisions were not your everyday run of the mill bad choices...leaving your husband and 6 children for a 23 year old!, signing over custody of your children to your ex-husband so that you can get a settlement, trying to get your children back and then killing yourself when it looks like you won't get them back immediately.

Nancy Rappaport does not sugarcoat anything. She portrays all of the members of her family, in what seems to be complete renditions. They are good and bad, they make mistakes, they survive.

This book was fascinating. I really felt for her and her family as I was reading it. I wondered though, will it be enough for her? Will it give her the answers she is looking for? I think she says it best, "Knowledge helps, even if we don't reach conclusions or tie up loose ends. The accumulation of details may never add up completely, but they do provide scaffolding for understanding."

Wendy says

A courageous and emotionally difficult book to write by a woman whose mom committed suicide when she was only four. More difficult to read for me when I know three of her wonderful children and eight of her gorgeous and talented grandchildren all of whom she never got to know. So it was very sad for her that she lost out on these relationships. Unexpressed in the book (for the protection of the grandchildren) is how loved, gifted and talented these grandchildren are. An important book for adult children whose parent is a suicide.

Sara Strand says

So I have to say once I started reading this book I was really worried it was going to be a story of "oh, my life is so awful because my mom isn't here and how will I ever cope" and it wasn't that... so I'm glad. It is a really well written account of the loss of a mother and a life long grief during poignant moments in your life when all you really want is your mom. As a son I don't know that losing a mom at such a young age would be life altering but for a daughter it would be. Certainly growing up the value of having a mother to answer your questions or to explain what your period is and what exactly to do with a tampon is pretty important. So what do you do if you don't have that? I often think women without mothers, or mothers who weren't really mothers anyways, are probably the best in womanhood because they have to do it on their own. They have to learn how to be a lady, run a household, be a partner and raise children on her own. She has no help or guidance, no role model. I know for myself it would be difficult- I lean on my own mother a lot when I encounter something I don't know.

The interesting twist to this book is that Nancy is a child psychiatrist so in writing her story and that of her mothers, she offers insightful information about suicide in general. One of the lines that stuck with me is on page 216:

"But I wonder if surviving my mother's suicide brings with it a certain knowledge that there are limits to keeping people alive if they are determined to kill themselves."

The only part of books that discuss this side of suicide that bother me is that I often feel the survivors are kind of selfish. It's not selfish to mourn the loss of a person who may or may not have had a lot more life to live, that we'd never know. But it is selfish to look only at what you've now loss and compare it to being worse than how the person was feeling before they decided suicide was their only option. And sometimes I think that when you're ready to go you should be able to go. A person only has so much fight in them for life and when you exhaust that, you have nothing to keep you going. It's like a car- once you run out of gas, you're going nowhere. It doesn't matter how big the crowd around you is cheering you on, that car isn't moving without more gas. All the love and cheering in the world doesn't put gas into that car, the driver has to actually make an effort to get the gas. And some people just can't do it anymore. And I respect that. When someone commits suicide I don't grieve their death, I grieve for the loss the survivors feel. That person

clearly was at ease with their death and was ready to go, but that doesn't mean others are ready for it.

So over all, I really enjoyed this book. It was an interesting insight to a family, Nancy expertly weaves her thoughts and reflections as an adult to childhood memories into a touching story of her mother's suicide. Also interesting is she included a "Further Reading" section that sounds like it's similar stories or good resources if you've survived a suicide or just the general loss of a significant person in your life.

Stephanie says

Suicide is “a permanent answer to a temporary setback” (page 216). When Nancy was four years old, her mother, (also) Nancy, a wife and mother of six children, committed suicide. In this memoir, Nancy searches to uncover the answers and reason for her mother’s suicide. Through extensive interviews with family and friends, as well as in depth reading of her mother’s own writings as well as newspaper articles, Nancy tries to unravel the past.

This book came to me at just the right time and for that I am grateful. Last week, my family and I got the horrible news that a childhood friend (my brother’s best friend as a kid) had committed suicide. Though I hadn’t spoken to him in years, as children we hung out a lot and had so much fun making movies, playing video games, etc. He was always funny and so full of life... so we couldn’t understand why he had done this. We were all shaken and terribly saddened by the news, even though it’d been awhile since we’d known him. We feel sad for his family and loved ones and sad for him most of all, because for reasons unknown to us, he must have been so sad, so desperate, that he felt this was his only option.

I don’t think that people who take their own lives realize how big of an effect it has on everyone. I’ve learned that suicide has long arms – probably a lot longer than the victim can imagine. Our friend’s death reached out to so many people and shook them up, people that were friends with him many years ago that he probably didn’t even know still cared. But they did. I know that for the rest of my life, I will be left wondering why, and even more so for those that were close with him. I will always remember him as the 12 year old boy who made my family and I laugh non-stop, running around in the backyard as “The Galloper,” our version of a scary movie. I’ll miss the boy I once knew, and I know even more people will miss the man he had become, who I was not fortunate enough to know.

Because of these recent events, I found myself very invested in this book, and wanted desperately to know why Nancy’s mother killed herself. Though on the outset, the suicide appeared to be an effect of a long custody battle which she lost, I know it had to have been more. Someone needs to feel so desperate, so alone in this world, to take their own life. Nancy was a very disturbed woman with a lot of emotional problems, despite her outer appearance to the world – that of a successful, beautiful politician and loving mother.

This memoir was both excellently researched and beautifully written. While it had the merits and intelligence of a scientific and well-researched book, it also had the heart of a memoir from a loving and desperately curious daughter. Much of the book was a run through of the family history, and not entirely about her mother and the suicide. The family was very large, boisterous, and dysfunctional – very fascinating to read about. Nancy’s father remarried a young, overwhelmed woman and eventually the family had 11 children (including step-siblings and half siblings), with her mother living separately from her children.

Read and reviewed: 2011

Erin says

The very personal way this is written – with its warm descriptions of siblings, husband - the indulgent way flaws are portrayed, is both a weakness and a strength. It's hard to find the 'psychiatrist' aspect you expect to come through more prominently.

There's some research peppered between the very personal stories, but even the glimpses of clients we see have left psychiatry at the door – more of a soft lense into human complexity. The title of the book is misleading, but it doesn't mean the book is bad. I developed a bond with the ghost of Nancy's mother – also named Nancy – who is fleshed out using the memory of her children, the stories of her friends, and the character she had written about in her unpublished novel. It paints a very human picture of a vulnerable child of alcoholics, whose cleverness was paired with her own addiction to sleeping pills, and a sometimes crippling depression.

As you try to find out more about the mysterious figure that is the first Nancy Rappaport, you meet her six children, and find out how their lives have panned out as they grew into adulthood. You meet the now elderly father's third wife, as well as the best friend and the ex-lover. You hear the soap opera-esque story that is the custody battle.

The whole book is the memoir of a family, after. *Life After Mother*. Maybe the second Nancy Rappaport had intentions to make it more psychiatric in nature, more scientific – but all that is lost in the emotions she feels about her family. Leave it up to the individual reader whether or not this adds or detracts from the book.

Jennifer says

"In Her Wake: A Child Psychiatrist Explores the Mystery of Her Mother's Suicide by Nancy Rappaport is a heartbreaking memoir that examines from personal, family and professional perspectives the decision of Rappaport's mother to take her own life when the author was only a 4-year-old. I applaud Rappaport for taking on a topic that must have taken immense courage, especially under the circumstances of less-than-supportive siblings, as readers will learn. As a child psychologist, one might expect the author to have a very clinical viewpoint, but in what I think is a refreshingly unexpected approach, readers will witness the consequences of the tragedy from the author's personal perspective. Though heartbreaking from the outset, Rappaport tells of her coping mechanisms and ultimately how she came to accept her past, understand the complexities of suicide, and how this all influences her as a mother of three. Readers will appreciate the depth of research and digging through family records that was necessary to piece together her own understanding of her mother and Rappaport offers resources for those dealing with suicide and other mental illnesses, making *In Her Wake* a work that educates as well as captivates. For discussion groups, I highly recommend *In Her Wake* for its unique perspective on the topic of suicide." JH/2011

Becca says

Although I've never lost a family member to suicide, I have two friends who have experienced that horrible tragedy. One friend lost her husband, after more than 30 years of marriage; another both her father

and her son, a pain I cannot even begin to fathom. Though years have passed for each of them, I still sense a desperate longing within them to understand those deaths, to comprehend why life became so unbearable for these persons they loved.

Nancy Rappaport, author of *In Her Wake*, shares that longing. Although she was only four years old when her mother, socialite and community activist Barbara Rappaport, deliberately took a lethal dose of barbituates, Nancy's sense of loss and bewilderment has haunted her throughout her entire life. So much so that she spent years analyzing legal records and her mother's private papers, talking with family members and friends (alienating some of them in the process), and using her own background as a psychiatrist to explore the mystery that led her mother to choose death over what appeared to be a full and invigorating life.

The book is an honest look not just at the author's mother, but at the entire Rappaport family – father Jerry, Nancy's five older siblings, and the step and half siblings who came later. Growing up in a blended family of 11 children gave the author several filters through which to see her parents at different stages of their lives.

Although obviously well founded in psychiatric theory, Rappaport's writing is accessible and interesting. Her ability to relate her own clinical experiences and her emotional feelings as a mother of three children gives the book an added and important dimension. The reader feels privileged to take this journey of discovery with her, and gratified at the sense of resolution she achieves by the end.
